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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chs/1505>

DOI: 10.4000/chs.1505

ISSN: 1663-4837

**Publisher**

Librairie Droz

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 1 October 2014

Number of pages: 129-130

ISBN: 978-2-600-01854-8

ISSN: 1422-0857

**Electronic reference**

Clive Emsley, « Simon Fieschi, *Les gendarmes en Corse 1927-1934. De la création d'une compagnie autonome aux derniers "bandits d'honneur"* », *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies* [Online], Vol. 18, n°2 | 2014, Online since 09 April 2015, connection on 22 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chs/1505> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/chs.1505>

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- 1 The inter-war years were not the happiest time for the French *Gendarmerie nationale*. Many gendarmes still felt frustrated that, for the first time in the history of their force, they had not been able to send a military unit of their own to the front during the First World War. Rather, they had become the butt of jokes among the *poilus*, notably with comments such as : "The front ends where you meet the first *gendarme*." But for the men posted to Corsica in the inter-war period, frustration and embarrassment about the *Gendarmerie*'s role in the war were the least of their worries. The institution still carried the image of the debonair, moustachioed, loyal, although not terribly bright, Pandore from Third Republic, which might have softened some post-war criticism, but this was largely on the mainland.
- 2 Corsica was characterised romantically as "un pays des montagnes dans la mer", but for many *gendarmes* posted to the island from the mainland it appeared as bad, if not worse, than some of the grimmer colonial postings. The land and the people were poor, and the people commonly looked on outsiders with suspicion. The cost of living was

high, and the locals were happy to fleece *gendarmes* as well as any other outsiders. Transport links were tenuous, especially in the more mountainous districts. Malaria was rampant; and there were the bandits. It was partly as a result of an apparent increase in banditry that, in 1927, the XV<sup>th</sup> Legion of the *Gendarmerie*, based in Marseilles, had part of its complement separated off as an autonomous company to be situated in Corsica. This company consisted of 635 men, twice the size of a normal departmental company, together with other police institutions, including from late 1931 some 600 *gardes républicains mobiles*. This made Corsica the most heavily policed region of France. The *compagnie autonome de la Corse* and its myriad difficulties are the subjects of Simon Fieschi's well-researched and lively monograph.

- 3 Fieschi's book, which draws heavily on the fragmentary records of the company that survive in the *Service historique de la Défense*, is divided into three sections. The first discusses the *Gendarmerie* Company in Corsica. There were difficulties in getting men to serve on the island because of the problems. There was supposed to be around two Corsican *gendarmes* in each local brigade of roughly six men to help with the language and customs; however they were often not too keen on the place. Incentives were offered, such as faster promotion and service on the island counting double towards a man's pension; but men still tried every way to get back to the mainland. They also lied about doing their ordinary daily service; they got drunk; they beat up their women and they amassed large debts. The implication here is that such behaviour was far worse than on the mainland – and perhaps in many parts of the French Empire. Yet more work probably needs to be done to see if this was indeed the case. Much of the men's dissatisfaction appears to have been related directly to the attitudes of the islanders towards them and the general relationship between *gendarmes* and Corsicans. This is the subject of the second section of the book. "Nous sommes en Corse", noted Lt. Col. Delavallade, the company commander from 1929 to 1931, "où le principe fait loi: 'Tous ceux qui ne sont pas du clan sont ennemis'". The small *Gendarmerie* brigades found themselves pressured to support influential clans during elections; individual *gendarmes*, especially NCOs, could be victimised by such clans. Equally difficult was the fact that all the men on the island carried firearms. The *gendarmes* generally used discretion in enforcing the law against carrying guns, but on occasions – when someone was shot – they had to get involved; and here they came up against another local problem. Vendetta and blood feuds were still a part of Corsican life. Given his way of life the bandit André Spada may not have been entirely typical of the island population; but when he declared that he was "un criminel mais non pas un voleur" he was playing up to the Corsican traditions of banditry and violence.
- 4 Spada, like most of the bandits described by Fieschi, was a nasty individual. Whatever their boasts, these men of honour robbed as well as murdered; they also indulged in fraud and protection rackets. They were cocky enough to write threats to representatives of the government. They exploited the heroic image of the *bandit d'honneur* to win sympathy from the local population; but whenever and where that sympathy faltered they turned to terror and violence. They revelled in opportunities to humiliate *gendarmes*, and isolated *Gendarmerie* brigades often preferred not to get involved and not to go out of their way to confront them. The third section of the book chronicles the way in which the *Gendarmerie* approached the problem of the bandits and, particularly, the military campaign that was launched against them in November 1931. This campaign appears something akin to a sweep against insurgents in a colonial possession after the Second World War. As well as the 600 *gardes républicains mobiles* the

*gendarmes* were equipped with machine-guns and were able to call on armoured vehicles. In addition they were given leeway to pressurise the families and friends of bandits so as to 'persuade' them to surrender. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, there were frictions between the different police institutions involved in the campaign as they vied for the credit, and the rewards, in various captures.

- 5 Fieschi has a fascinating story to tell, and he tells it well. He carefully sets out the sources for his work in an introductory chapter, but thereafter, unfortunately, scholarly apparatus is put to one side. Most seriously, there is no index. Although it is possible for readers to find their way to broad topics, thanks to well-signposted chapters and subdivisions, there is no way easily to find references to individuals like Spada, or like François Bornea, a former *gendarme* who became a bandit. Similarly, while the principle *Gendarmerie* documents are discussed in general terms, they are not cited in footnotes so the reader is left to guess where particular quotations may be found, and sometimes it is not immediately clear in what year a report or reprimand was written.
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## AUTHORS

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